

“What Is It That’s Going On Here?”: Frames for Teaching American Political Conflict in Divided Times

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In his seminal 1974 work *Frame Analysis*, Erving Goffman argued that “when individuals encounter any situation, they face the question: ‘What is it that’s going on here?’”¹ To answer this question, they turn to frames—interpretive structures embedded in thought and communication that help people make sense of the world and their experience.² Many Americans are looking at our deeply divided political landscape and asking, “What the heck is going on here?” In classrooms across the country, educators are grappling with how to address this question with curious and confused students amid a contentious political climate. In this paper, I argue that how educators frame modern-day American political conflicts to students matters deeply. The frames they choose to explain these divisions shape how students understand the causes and sources of our political conflicts; what should be done to address them; and who should take action, how, and why.

I develop this point by analyzing a widely used frame for explaining political conflict in the US: political polarization. While political polarization has become a nearly ubiquitous way to describe American political conflict, I argue that as a *pedagogical frame* it has critical content and normative limitations that render it inadequate to meet the demands of civic education in a time of democratic vulnerability.³ These limitations derive in part from the fact that the conceptualizations of polarization that have become dominant in the public sphere draw primarily on evolutionary and social psychology. While these fields have made vital contributions to our understanding of political conflict, their tendency to focus on interpersonal and group-based psychological explanations has meant that historical and structural factors have often been minimized or omitted.⁴ This elision is further facilitated by the visual diagrams commonly used to represent polarization, such as those developed by the Pew Research

Center (Figure 1).⁵

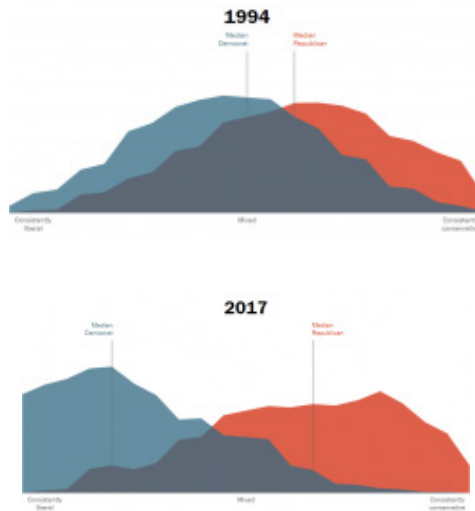


Figure 1. Polarization diagrams from the Pew Research Center. Source: “Political Polarization, 1994-2017.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., October 20, 2017, <https://www.people-press.org/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/>.

Such visual tools depict macro-shifts in electorate and partisan political values along a red-blue spectrum—from consistently conservative to consistently liberal. These diagrams do not offer a comprehensive, nuanced representation of political ideologies or conflicts over time. Nor are they a normative framework for evaluating partisan positions or divisions. However, they are used widely for both purposes. In combination with psychological explanations that emphasize the interpersonal dimensions of partisan conflict, these diagrams become powerful visual metaphors, representing our core political problem as increased distance and thus implying that the solution is to “come together” both socially and politically.

The result is that this frame promulgates causal narratives and moral evaluations of American political conflict that fail to grapple adequately with the social, structural, and historical forces, such as racial hierarchy, economic inequality, and unrepresentative political institutions, that have shaped our

modern-day political landscape. When used in these ways, polarization frames can contribute to “genesis amnesia”—the forgetting of how conflicts and the identities, hierarchies, and structures that fomented them have come into being—and can limit students’ abilities to understand and reason normatively both about conflict in democracy conceptually and our specific political conflicts today.⁶ For these reasons, centering political polarization frames in classrooms should give educators pause.

For a stronger frame for teaching about American political division, I believe we should look to the emerging concepts of democratic fragility, resilience, and erosion. This “family constellation” of related concepts, which also includes democratic backsliding, decay, and other similar terms, is currently developing and coalescing into a cohesive field, largely in response to the growing threats to democratic norms and systems around the world.⁷ (For concision, I will use the term “democratic fragility” moving forward, but I am not committed to this term over the others listed.) Democratic fragility and its “constellation” of related concepts are promising for several reasons. First, many scholars of democratic strength and weakness look across history, nations, and institutional contexts to identify patterns of democratic collapse and derive lessons for the future.⁸ This scholarship helps to elucidate the historical and structural origins of our political divisions and to reveal the corrosive effects of inequality, oppression, and disenfranchisement on democratic strength. Furthermore, analyses of democratic fragility can, and often do, encompass discussions of polarization. In these accounts, polarization is situated as one of several forces impacting democracy, and its psychological processes are linked to the social, cultural, and historical contexts by which they are shaped. By guiding students through these lines of inquiry, a frame rooted in democratic fragility can strengthen students’ understanding of what building a strong democracy requires and can cultivate their commitment to playing a role in this vital work. Such a pedagogical frame is what civic educators need to teach US political division in ways that prepare students for citizenship in a democracy under threat.

But first, what are frames? Goffman defines them as interpretive structures and schemas that shape people’s “definitions” of social situations and

experiences.⁹ These structures exist both in the minds of individuals as well as in broader political discourse, helping people make sense of the extraordinary number of events, experiences, and perspectives they encounter as they move through the world.¹⁰ Frames do this ordering work by presenting a situation, idea, issue, or phenomenon in a way that promotes a “*particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.*”¹¹ By shaping understanding, frames also guide public opinion, mobilize consensus, and motivate action. While frames are consciously developed by political elites and activists to advance their agendas, they are also shaped and disseminated by journalists and the public.¹² Schools too are critical sites and sources of framing, “actively [shaping] politics and intergroup relations” by informing students’ understanding of social groups and identities.¹³ Pedagogical frames—forms of strategic communication that package and present the world’s complex realities in ways that facilitate student learning—play a vital role in this process. The frames transmitted by educators, curricular materials, and school environments can motivate students to take action, applying their knowledge and skills to affect society.

What “*particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation*” does the frame of political polarization present to students regarding American political conflict? A common version follows this arc: In the mid-twentieth century, Americans were not so divided by politics or partisanship. There were conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, and the parties were much less split along lines such as race, gender, and religion. But beginning in the late 1970s, American legislators and then the electorate began sorting themselves ideologically, with more liberals becoming Democrats and more conservatives becoming Republicans.¹⁴ At the same time, the parties began sorting along many other identities as well. The Republican party became more white, male, Christian, religiously observant, Southern, and rural. The Democratic party saw an influx of people of color, women, the less- or non-religious, and city dwellers.¹⁵ Through this process of sorting, many important identities became intertwined, magnifying partisanship into a “mega-identity” that could signal a person’s “religion, race, ethnicity, gender,

neighborhood,” preferred media networks, favorite grocery store, and more.¹⁶ As these differences increasingly stacked up along party lines, partisan dislike and distrust grew. By 2016, forty-five percent of Republicans and forty-one percent of Democrats reported that they thought the other party was a threat to the nation’s wellbeing.¹⁷ This intense dislike and even loathing for those we disagree with politically has been termed “affective,” “toxic,” or “pernicious” polarization.¹⁸

This narrative argues that while partisan sorting reflects some real differences in identity and issue position, polarization has also caused us mistakenly to see our political opponents as “bad, flawed, inexplicably misguided, or even dangerous people.”¹⁹ To quote a report from the civic dialogue organization Braver Angels (previously Better Angels),

As a form of *civic blindness*—the condition of viewing one’s fellow citizens inaccurately—a high level of affective polarization endangers society. It *produces* policy gridlock, degrades public discussion, likely contributes to inequality, segregates us, erodes social trust, thwarts empathy, and weakens our intellects.²⁰

In this formulation, affective polarization (that is, strong negative feelings about political opponents) causes partisans to “mis-see” each other as dangerous, which “produces” acrimonious outcomes that threaten democracy.

Why does sorting into groups along multiple social identities cause this mis-seeing and hatred? Drawing on evolutionary psychology and social identity theory, the polarization frame argues that humans are “hard-wired” to be “tribal”—to divide themselves into in-groups and out-groups. As the story goes, when we were developing into our humanness in the pre-civilized world, we needed social in-groups to protect us from threatening out-groups. As Civic Health Project’s white paper *Depolarizing America* describes, these harsh beginnings have left us with a “relentless, evolutionary zeal to distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them,’” which we have now applied to politics, collapsing “multiple identifying characteristics—race, gender, faith, geography, etc.—into simplifying political ‘super identities.’”²¹ Political conflict along these social identity lines sends our

group-sorting evolutionary instinct into overdrive. However, with effort, we can override this psychological programming and come to see each other more clearly—with respect, tolerance, and appreciation.

If the problem is polarization, then the implied solution is depolarization, achieved by moving away from the poles of “extreme” partisan positions and toward each other politically and socially. One of the most common ways suggested to achieve this outcome is interpersonal contact: fostering engagement and dialogue across the political spectrum to develop understanding and lower partisan animosity. This approach is based on the social psychological framework known as contact theory, which argues that under the right conditions, interactions between groups can reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict.²² Numerous civic and educational organizations have been founded on this theory of change, such as Braver Angels, Bridge the Divide, AllSides, and Living Room Conversations. In sum, this polarization frame says that the root cause of our political conflicts is our psychology, and thus the solution is psychological as well. If our minds got us into this mess, changing our minds is what will get us out.

Before moving into critique, it is important to acknowledge that the political polarization frame has important strengths. My aim is not to attack scholars of polarization or organizations focused on fostering cross-partisan dialogue. Nor is it to argue that political polarization should not be taught in schools; polarization is an important concept that students must understand to be fluent civic participants. Rather, my interest is in repositioning it as *one* aspect of American political conflict. A strength of the polarization frame is its focus on humans’ well documented tendencies to display group-based cognitive bias and skewed reasoning.²³ To quote the author George Saunders, our brains are indeed “flawed thinking machines,” and appreciating that fact can help us embrace “a kind of ritual humility” that is essential to the practices of citizenship needed in diverse democracies, such as open-mindedness, respectful disagreement, and a belief in the value of others’ opinions and contributions.²⁴ A second strength is that the polarization metaphor and its visual representations work well for the purpose for which they were intended: to capture a 50,000-foot view of

the shifting sands of political values and partisan alignments among legislators and the electorate. While it is certainly true that polarization diagrams omit complexities of the American political landscape, they are effective for their intended purpose: to depict macro political and ideological shifts in the parties and the public.

However, as a primary pedagogical frame for teaching students about US political conflict, political polarization has important limitations. First, the widely used version of the frame described above misses critical details in its explanation of the source of our political conflicts. While psychology-based popular explanations that locate the origins of our conflicts in “our minds” are not *wrong*, they are profoundly incomplete. This omission happens in part because these polarization narratives often jump from humanity’s evolutionary origins to the mid-twentieth century, when the American National Election Studies (ANES) began collecting data from the electorate about partisan alignment and affect.²⁵ Through this leap, many historical, social, and structural forces that are critical to understanding where our political conflicts come from become obscured. In some ways, this leap is also facilitated by the polarization diagrams themselves. These diagrams—often linear red-blue spectrums—were not designed as dynamic or nuanced representations of historical or social events (Figure 2). The scale of the red-blue axis remains fixed, regardless of substantive changes in the content of “moderate” or “extreme” partisan views or party platforms. In other words, these diagrams do not address critical questions like: What viewpoints or stances do these categories and positions represent? Who is represented in this diagram and who is missing? How have these answers changed over time?

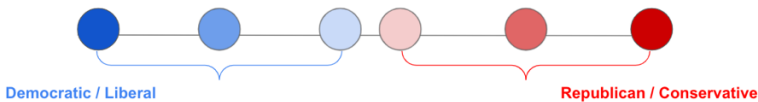


Figure 2. Model of a common polarization diagram, including sample “positions.”

It becomes clear why these obscurations matter when we consider the example of rising polarization in the late 1970s. Polarization diagrams represent

this shift as a straightforward story: the (fairly) steady drift of the parties and partisans away from each other and toward the poles. The historical reality is far more complex. The mid-twentieth century is often described as a “golden age of bipartisanship” in America, and many wax nostalgic about this time, using it as a reference for the kind of political collaboration to which legislators and the electorate should aim to return. But this era of legislative amicability was facilitated by a racial compact of white supremacy, in which leadership of both parties accepted the massive voter suppression and anti-democratic violence against Americans of color, particularly Black Americans. With the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965 this pact was broken, and two things happened: first, Southern Democrats and conservatives migrated to the Republican party. Second, engaged and newly enfranchised communities of color voted increasing numbers of Black and Latinx representatives into office, and these legislators largely joined the Democratic party. Over time, these two developments remade the nation’s political parties and significantly increased polarization.²⁶

Thus, while racism, white supremacy, and the increased enfranchisement of non-white Americans all played a central role in shaping our modern-day political parties and polarization, these elements are not represented in polarization diagrams and are often absent from popular polarization narratives, particularly those geared toward students.²⁷ Of course, one could argue that racial hierarchy is a classic case of in-group/out-group dynamics that the polarization frame references. However, that approach risks hand-waving over critical aspects of our national history that students must know in order to engage in effective normative reasoning about US politics and intergroup relations. Being explicit and thorough when teaching students the specifics of our political history—*how* and *why* our political conflicts have been tied to racial hierarchy and disenfranchisement, for example—matters. Failing to do so risks excluding and negating the experiences and histories of students of color and their communities, causing alienation and harm.²⁸ Such omissions can also lead to what Jessica Solyom and Bryan Brayboy, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, refer to as “genesis amnesia,” the forgetting of how conflicts, and the identities, hierarchies, and structures

that fomented them, have come into being. Through these omissions, genesis amnesia can normalize social structures, social identities, and conflicts as “organic,” “natural or biological,” or “just the way things are,” and can prevent us from imagining how else the world could be.²⁹

Second, the polarization frame has important normative limitations. In its assertion that depolarization is the solution to our conflicts, it buries the questions, “Is depolarization good? Why? For what ends? What kinds of depolarization might be best?” Imagine if the US political landscape shifted so that most Americans moved to the right of the political spectrum, to the left, or to the center. All these shifts would achieve “depolarization” and thus would be equally desirable. Because the primary outcome advanced by the polarization frame is reducing distance, it offers no way to evaluate which (if any) of these scenarios is “better,” either for specific issues or for our democracy as a whole. In the absence of such a normative framework, those focused on depolarization often default to encouraging citizens to compromise and move toward “the middle,” as any other movement suggests a “winner” and a “loser.” This pressure can lead to “both-sidesism,” or “the search for equivalence” where one may not exist, manifesting in claims that all positions are “equally good” or, alternatively, “equally extreme.”³⁰ Such rhetoric can focus attention away from rigorous evaluation of the specific views being offered. In sum, while polarization has conceptual utility, it is limited, and perhaps even harmful, when used as the primary pedagogical frame for transmitting historical and civic content to students and for guiding normative reasoning about our political conflicts.

While these limitations of the polarization frame would be reason enough to reconsider its use in the classroom, our current moment of democratic threat makes this ever more critical.³¹ As one scholar recently stated, “The parties aren’t really the story. The story is whether we have a democracy or not . . . We need to drop the idea that democracy is just out there like the air we breathe and make democracy the story itself.”³² To achieve this shift in focus, a stronger pedagogical frame is needed.

What “*particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation*” should such an alternative frame offer? While this is

a question that requires many more minds to answer, I believe there are four things at minimum this frame must do: first, it must emphasize the foundational elements of democracy and why they are essential for democratic governance: regularly held free and fair elections, universal adult suffrage of citizens, and protections for fundamental civil liberties and demographic minorities.³³ Furthermore, it must empirically demonstrate that these elements are under threat. Second, this frame would need to articulate the key forces, based on study of the US and nations around the world, that weaken and strengthen democracies. The frame should specifically introduce students to the compounding threats that American democracy is facing today. Recent polling of political scientists suggests scholars broadly agree on the top six threats: economic inequality, racial inequality, unrepresentative political institutions, partisan polarization, misinformation and uncivil debate, and populism/illiberalism.³⁴ Third, this frame would aim to make a compelling case to students for why fighting for a resilient democracy is “worth it” and what is at stake—for them, their communities, and the nation—if ours breaks down. Importantly, this frame should not simply advocate “saving” American democracy as is but rather should welcome students into the work of envisioning what a thriving American democracy should look like. Finally, it should explicitly call students to enact the democratic work that is most important to them, encouraging them to discern roles that align with their values, skills, resources, and talents. This description is not intended to be exhaustive; while I believe that a better frame must include these four elements, there may well be others that are equally important. It is also not intended to prescribe specific curricula; there are myriad possible pedagogical approaches to realizing these aims. Indeed, there are several educational efforts underway already to pursue many of these goals, including the work of initiatives such as Educating for American Democracy, Citizen University, iCivics, and the CivX-Now coalition. The key is to weave these various strands together to create a cohesive frame, offering “the kinds of overarching and relevant narratives” that civic education experts agree are needed in K-12 curricula.³⁵

Still, this is a hefty set of aims, and pursuing them will no doubt raise numerous normative questions and significant implementation challenges. Ac-

knowledging this, I believe new scholarship on democratic fragility, resilience, and their “family constellation” of related concepts offers us the best starting place. This emerging field’s focus on mining historical and global examples of democratic rise and collapse offers rich source material to illustrate what strengthens and weakens democracy and what is at stake when things fall apart. The scholarship’s global lens helps counter American exceptionalism and encourages students to expand their gaze beyond our borders. Furthermore, such study makes clear the US’s centuries-long, ongoing struggle to democratize fully. It connects discussions of modern and historical oppression, disenfranchisement, and inequality to democratic viability, helping students trace the corrosive consequences of injustice that can negatively impact all citizens. Finally, this frame offers at least some lens with which to evaluate what kinds of political shifts are normatively and empirically desirable by orienting us around the question: What will best help realize a resilient democracy? As Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman write, “one key to protecting democracy is surprisingly simple: to allow that goal to explicitly guide political choices” and to “focus on whether the measure at hand will reinforce democracy or weaken it.”³⁶ While taking up such a question will certainly yield disagreement, this orientation offers a more powerful normative compass than the polarization frame’s narrower urging to overcome negative partisan emotions and meet in “the middle.”

In sum, these frames offer two very different stories about what causes American political conflict and what should be done about it. The polarization frame tells students that the central threat to democracy is Americans’ conflict with and dislike of each other. It can send the message that the core job of a citizen is to compromise, resolve conflict, and find “common ground.” This frame obscures other diagnoses and thus other solutions, roles, and forms of action that are vital to democracy. In contrast, a frame centered on democratic resilience and fragility implies that building, sustaining, and participating in a strong, fully representative democracy is the goal of engaged citizenship. In doing so, it calls students into many types of citizenship and justice work. Furthermore, this frame makes “democracy the story itself” in a way that honors the diverse experiences and histories of students and their communities and

links today's political divisions to America's ongoing struggle to realize its democratic ideals. Such a frame is what our students deserve and what this political moment requires.

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